

## ***How do I know my child is legally old enough to stay home alone?***

There is no California law that sets a specific age. General consensus sets the age at around 12 years old, but there are many variables, such as the child's maturity (and emotional comfort at the idea of staying home alone), the safety of the environment, the number of hours that the child will be alone, access to adults in case of an emergency, etc.

Your local child care Resource and Referral can provide you with additional information and resources. Also, the Resource & Referral can give you information regarding emergency resources in your area, like fire, police, etc. You may want to ask if your county has a "Phone Friend" phone line, which can be called by children who are staying home alone if they need to talk to an adult and you are not available.

The following is an article on safety tips (from Canada, but the same basic information applies) regarding children's readiness to stay home alone:

### **At Home, Alone: Safety Tips for Latchkey Children**

*by Debra Mayer, Communication Officer, Manitoba Child Care Association*

When is it OK to allow your child to come home alone after school? How do you judge that your child has the maturity to handle this milestone towards growing up? What are the steps your family may want to go through to prepare your child for this new responsibility? Should your child be a "latchkey kid?"

According to Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, a well-known professor of pediatrics and writer, "right through the teen years, youngsters desperately need the supervision of loving adults. They need a responsible person who cares about them to greet them after school and say, "how was your day?" They need an adult present to offset peer pressure and to put limits on exploration into such things as matches, inappropriate TV, or in the case of teenagers, drugs, sex and the liquor cabinet."

While community based child care programs, activities organized by Parks and Recreation or the local community club, or after school lessons fit the needs of many families, some older school age children begin campaigning to come home after school at about age 10. Yet according to Manitoba's Child Welfare laws, no child under the age of 12 is to be left alone without suitable provision. What is that suitable provision? For your family, this may mean a well thought out plan of action for your child's safety and a careful assessment of your child's readiness to assume responsibility for self care.

Here are some readiness indicators:

- Does she want to be on her own?
- Is he afraid to be alone in the house?
- Can you depend on her to follow the house rules?
- Does he complete his assigned chores as agreed upon?
- Can you rely on her to tell the truth?
- Does he have common sense?
- Can she deal with unexpected situations in a positive way?

- Is he self motivated?
- Can she amuse herself or does she require constant supervision?

After you've honestly answered these questions, you may decide that your child is in fact ready to be home alone. Next, you should prepare your home itself before your child begins this independent foray into self-care. Just as you baby-proofed your home with your baby's safety in mind, you must again ensure your home is proofed for your older school-ager or young teen.

Here are some details you may wish to consider:

- The doors have secure deadbolts, and doors are always locked until parents come home. If you have a security system, your child knows how it works. She should be reminded to never use the code around friends, as you don't want that kind of information out in your neighborhood.
- A working fire extinguisher is accessible to your child, and your child knows how to use it. There is a smoke detector on every floor of the home. Your child knows and practices a fire alarm plan.
- A first aid kit is readily available. Emergency numbers are posted near the telephone (parents' work numbers, relatives, friends, police, fire station, ambulance, and so on).
- Appliances are well maintained. Teach your child how to use the microwave or toaster oven correctly so that she can prepare simple snacks after school.
- Guns are stored separately from ammunition, which should be under lock and key.
- A flashlight and batteries are available, and your child knows where they are in case of power outage.
- Emergency money is left with instructions for your child.
- Alcohol is locked away.
- Medicines, cleaning supplies and other toxic substances are in their original, labeled containers and stored in a safe place.
- Light timers are installed so that your child doesn't return home to a dark house, especially in the winter months.

These common sense practices must be instilled in your child, for the sake of his/her safety and well-being.

- Check in with a parent or alternate caregiver on arriving home.
- Answer the door and telephone safely, without revealing that he is home alone.
- Administer basic first aid. (You might want to have your child attend a course given by St. John's Ambulance or the Red Cross).
- Use the major appliances and know what to do if one breaks down.
- Handle sharp objects safely.
- Deal with a small or large fire if one develops.
- Operate the switches or controls for heat, light, and water.
- Recognize the signs of forced entry and what to do. Your child should be instructed to never enter the home if a window is broken, the door is open, or a light is on that usually isn't. Tell him to go to a neighbor's for help. Calling the police from there may be indicated.
- Lock all doors when alone.
- Tell you immediately about any fears or concerns.

Key security is often an issue as children may lose the key before getting home or forget to take it in the morning. Keys should be worn on a chain around the neck and tucked inside a shirt, pinned inside a pocket or attached to a belt loop. Ideally, you can recruit a neighbor (perhaps a retiree or

a parent at home with a little one) who will agree to serve as an emergency contact, if the child loses her key or runs into trouble.

Use love notes to remind your child of chores and homework, and make them feel less alone. Include funny personal messages, as well as any important instructions. These can be taped somewhere your child won't miss them-to the fridge door, the TV, or computer.

Define your house rules for your child so that they are clear and easy to follow. Determine your position about friends coming over after school, or your home may be the gathering point for lots of kids once word gets around that there's no grown up to supervise. One friend maximum might be the rule for your family. Keep a close eye on compliance with this rule, as peer pressure can influence your child into a behavior she might never think about on her own. What about going over to a friend's to play or do homework? How should you be notified so that you're not frantically calling home and getting no answer?

If your family is on the Internet, there should be special thought paid to what your child may be exposed to when you're not there to monitor access. Explicit TV or prohibited video games may be other considerations for you and your child.

Think about healthy snacks or else your child may fill up on junk food each day. Have fruits or veggies cut up and washed in a bowl in the fridge. Cereal and milk, peanut butter and crackers, cheese cubes, popcorn or rice cakes are other simple snacks. Or leave clear directions about what's OK to prepare: cinnamon toast, pizza pops, or oriental noodle soups.

What are your limits about outdoor play? (Where, with whom, for how long?) Are telephone calls OK? What about if you have to call home to say you'll be late, and can't get through? Think about homework, hobbies, special projects, and chores such as walking the dog or practicing the piano.

Let your child know the reasons behind the rules, and the consequences if they are not followed. Rules, if reasonable and enforced, help children feel more secure when they are on their own. Unusual situations are bound to occur. You may decide to discuss with your child any exceptions to the rules, and plan for the unexpected.

A final few considerations:

- Ensure your child knows what to do if you should be late arriving home, (or if he should come home early.)
- Arrange for back up care for sick days.
- Hold weekend family discussions to review personal schedules.
- Discuss what to do with your child if he is ill, hurt, lonely or afraid.
- Make sure your child knows someone to contact if he needs help or is followed home from school (a neighbor, relatives, a school patrol, a Block Parent, the police, Kids Help Phone Line.)

Some latchkey children experience exaggerated fears, chronic loneliness, depression and poor academic achievement. These potential factors must be weighed against the cost of licensed child care or a neighbor you can pay to look after your child until you get home from work. Consider a teenager who might meet your child and keep them company until you arrive. Keep in mind that while you may feel two hours after school is manageable for your child, you may still need to make other arrangements for longer periods of time, such as early dismissal days, in-services, winter and spring breaks and the long months of summer holidays. Dr. Brazelton says, "During

these all-important bridge years between childhood and adulthood, kids really do need something constructive to do, and they also still need to have their activities supervised. Most of all, they need to know that their parents care about them, are involved in their lives, and have their best interests at heart."

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